The servant's paradox: Part I

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A paradox is where two things seem to be opposite, but you know they are both true. It's a tension, a contradiction, an antimony (according to my thesaurus), a mystery. It's the fact that too many cooks spoil the broth, but at the same time, many hands make light work. It's the truth that he who hesitates is lost, but only a fool wouldn't look before he leaps.

There are plenty of paradoxes in Christian ministry, and they keep those with the responsibility of serving God's people in a healthy state of confusion. Many of us would love to have the rules set down in black and white, where 1 + 1 = 2 and there are formulae we can apply to get gospel work done. But God, in his wisdom, made the matter of serving him a far more humbling affair.

In this column, I plan to share with you my growing collection of paradoxes that I have gleaned from Scripture over the years. Feel free to email The Briefing (mailto:briefing@matthiasmedia.com.au) and add your own.

Paradox #1: Work hard, and rest in God's sovereignty

The Scriptures tell us to work hard at serving the Lord. There is plenty of encouragement to bend the back as a Christian, to expend our energies on activities that aim at glorifying God. We expect that being a fruitful Christian will

take some effort and application. [1 Corinthians 15:58 (http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/search/?](http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/search/?q=1%20Corinthians%2015:58) [q=1%20Corinthians%2015:58)](http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/search/?q=1%20Corinthians%2015:58) says just this:

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.

The Lord's work requires devotion; it can't be half-hearted or effortless. Paul gives Timothy three very hard-working analogies to consider:

No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him. An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. It is the hardworking farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops ([2 Tim 2:4-6 (http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/search/?q=2%20Tim%202:4-6)](http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/search/?q=2%20Tim%202:4-6)).

His advice to Timothy is to consider himself a 'worker', labouring for the Lord and doing his best ([2 Tim 2:15](http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/search/?q=2%20Tim%202:15) [(http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/search/?q=2%20Tim%202:15)](http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/search/?q=2%20Tim%202:15)). He urges diligence, perseverance, care and elbow grease.

Those involved in Christian ministry will attest to the truth of this. It isn't a romantic business; it's tough, and takes endurance. We have to work hard at our commitment to studying the Scriptures, to visiting our congregation members, to praying, to organizing meetings and activities, and pushing them to completion. In fact, we find it hard to imagine gospel work as anything but *work*.

However, if you feel this way, you are only seeing part of the picture.

The paradox of gospel work is that it isn't our labour at all; we rest in the sovereignty of God, who upholds all things and makes sure his plans come into being. There is something extremely unsettling about the following Psalm for anyone who is 'active' in ministry:

Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth!

([Ps 46:10 (http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/search/?q=Ps%2046:10)](http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/search/?q=Ps%2046:10))

What are the people of God told to *do* in order to win the battle and see the great victory of God? Be still and know that God is God. There's the paradox: to be God's people is to work hard and labour in love; to be busy, busy, busy; and do all that is before us, while at the same time resting in the knowledge that God is over it all.

This paradox holds true for prayer. In [Philippians 4:6 (http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/search/?q=Philippians%204:6)](http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/search/?q=Philippians%204:6) , we are told to pray rather than worry. I tend to worry and then pray. I shouldn't worry; I should just pray. We pray because we know God is in control, not because we hope to convince him to take control. Likewise, the paradox helps to explain

the idea of the Sabbath. The Sabbath rest is built into creation itself. It's the way God did things. We too can afford to rest—and we should rest, because God is sovereign over everything. Christian workers need to take time off and not feel that things will fall apart; God will take care of it. I find Jesus' words in [Mark 6:31 (http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/search/?q=Mark%206:31)](http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/search/?q=Mark%206:31) encouraging for busy pastors:

And he said to them,"Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.

We can see this paradox at work in small group activities too. You have to act and think and work hard to see growth come in the small groups that you lead for your church. Paul tells Timothy to devote himself to the public reading of scripture, to preaching and teaching, and so on. So you've got to do that. But at the same time, the only way growth will come is through God. We plant, we water, we cultivate, but God grows ([1 Cor 3:5-9 (http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/search/?q=1%20Cor%203:5-9)](http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/search/?q=1%20Cor%203:5-9)). The success of the whole venture is entirely in his hands. So relax.

The point is summarized in Jesus's words to Peter in [Matthew 16:18 (http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/search/?q=Matthew%2016:18%20)](http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/search/?q=Matthew%2016:18%20) : "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it". Good Protestants know that this verse has nothing to do with the Pope, but we can still misread it in an egotistical human fashion to be suggesting that somehow God needed Peter. It isn't Peter who is doing the work here; *God* will build his church. And yet Peter made every effort in the work of the gospel (see [1 Peter 1 (http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/search/?q=1%20Peter%201)](http://www.gnpcb.org/esv/search/?q=1%20Peter%201)). Perhaps the outcome for us all is this: we are going to have to work hard at recognizing that God is in control.